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## Establishing Academic and Social Support Groups for Teacher Education

### Students

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### ABSTRACT

*Following their research into cooperative learning, Johnson and Johnson (1994) have suggested that teachers establish base groups in their classes to provide academic and social support to students. Base groups are small groups of students that meet regularly to discuss matters associated with the students' social and academic goals and progress. One of the features of base groups is that the teacher does not participate in their discussions unless specifically invited to do so. While there is some evidence that base groups are effective in providing academic and social support to school students, there is little information about their effectiveness at the tertiary level. This paper describes how base groups were used in tutorials for student teachers as a way of giving them academic and social support. The effectiveness of the base groups was determined by obtaining feedback from students and by studying journals kept by the tutors who implemented the innovation. This process indicated that base groups were an effective way of providing academic and social support to*

*teacher education students and had a positive effect on their learning. In addition, students were able to meet some of their social needs while they worked with the subject matter of the class.*

### BACKGROUND

Within their work on cooperative learning, Johnson and Johnson advocate the use of *base groups* to provide academic and social support to students at all educational levels (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994). They define base groups as "long-term heterogeneous cooperative learning groups with stable membership" (Johnson et al., 1994, p. 8) that meet regularly to discuss issues set by the teacher or determined by the group itself. Base groups provide students with opportunities to develop relationships with their peers by both providing and receiving peer support.

Our earlier research (Sullivan & King, 1999) showed that base groups established in a primary school classroom empowered students to solve social and personal problems, and assisted them to learn many cognitive, social and cooperative skills. In addition, base groups helped establish an

effective learning, environment and had a positive influence on student achievement.

Building on the success of base groups in a primary-school classroom, another tutor and I wondered whether base groups could be used at the tertiary level to provide academic and social support to students and in turn enhance the quality of their learning.

Base groups are usually established to enhance students' social motivation. Social motivation focuses on the intrapersonal and interpersonal needs of students within the classroom, and students translate these needs into goals they want to achieve. For example, students who strive for a sense of belonging might adopt a goal of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships with peers. Hence, students' intrapsychological strivings or needs become manifested in the interpersonal domain. While base groups can support students' efforts to satisfy their social goals, they can do more than this. Research into motivation indicates that social motivation and achievement motivation are interconnected (Weiner, 1996; Wentzel, 1996), and that satisfaction and dissatisfaction of social needs affects achievement motivation (Weiner, 1996). For instance, students who feel a sense of belonging in a class are likely to pursue achievement goals and to continue with their studies. In addition, academic achievement has been linked with pursuit of certain social goals in academic settings (Wentzel, 1999): high-achieving

students were more likely to strive to attain goals of behaving responsibly than low-achieving students. Therefore the establishment of base groups in tutorials could help students to fulfil their needs for a sense of belonging and influence, establish and maintain interpersonal relations, and could possibly influence their achievement motivation and learning.

We decided to establish base groups for teacher education students in order to encourage them to provide academic and social support to their peers. We used base groups in five pre-service Bachelor of Education classes. Two classes involved first year secondary education students and three involved second year primary education students. The former were taking a compulsory unit focusing on a range of issues and challenges likely to shape the future directions of education in Australia. The latter were studying a compulsory unit covering human development, learning and basic technical skills. Both units had the same arrangement of a lead lecture in which essential information was provided, followed by a two-hour class in which students participated in activities dealing with unit content. There were approximately 25-32 students in each class, and most were female. Two staff members taught these classes, one taking the two first-year classes for secondary education students and one second-year class for primary education students, while the

other taught two second-year classes for primary education students. In the following section, I describe how we structured and implemented the base groups in these classes.

### **STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF BASE GROUPS**

We established the base groups in the second week of the thirteen-week semester by forming heterogeneous groups consisting of three or four randomly-selected members. We explained the rationale for the base groups, their purpose and the way in which they would operate. In particular, we emphasised these matters:

Base groups are founded on the following ideas:

Strong people share

Strong people come together and solve (indecipherable)

Purpose of base groups:

< Base groups are intended to be cohesive groups that will provide academic and social support to students.

Mechanics of their operation:

- The tutor will randomly choose the groups.
- The groups will exist for the duration of the semester.
- Students cannot change the group to which they are assigned.
- If the groups have problems that they cannot resolve, the tutor will help them work toward a solution.

- Group members must keep confidential any personal matters discussed in the meetings.

- Groups must reach a consensus before sharing anything, with others.

We explained to students that they would be expected to provide both academic and social support to base group members, and to do this in a variety of ways. During meetings, students would discuss issues and share ideas related to lectures, readings, assignments and the course in general. Students should also enquire about the well being of all group members. Students were expected to inform their groups if they would be absent from a class, and arrange for other members to provide them with messages and handouts from lectures and tutorials that they had missed.

The groups met for approximately 5-15 minutes at the beginning of every tutorial to discuss issues regarding the unit. As soon as students entered the room, they sat in a circle with their base group. We then provided them with particular issues to discuss and gave them advice on how to conduct meetings. We designed these tasks according to the perceived needs of the students. In the beginning, we thought that students needed to get to know each other, develop rapport with other members of their group, and build trust within the group. The first task we assigned was to design and make a business card for their group, including: (a) either a team name, a symbol or a motto; (b) names of group members; and (c) contact telephone numbers.

This activity helped students to get to know each other and exchange contact details. Later tasks provided guidelines for social interactions that would encourage students to become more aware of their interpersonal skills as well as enabling them to provide academic and social support to group members. As the semester progressed, we determined students' emerging needs by listening to their concerns, seeking

evaluations from them, and observing their interaction. Following are two examples of tasks given to the second-year base groups in the third and sixth weeks of semester.

In week three, we thought that students should get to know each other better, begin to provide support to other group members and seek support from them. Accordingly, we gave them the following task:

Week 3

- < Greet each other (use names and give eye contact).
- < Ask how everyone is generally.
- < Ask each member, "What is the best thing that has happened for you this week?"
- < Check everyone attended the lecture and last week's workshop. Arrange to give handouts, notes and messages to those who missed them.
- < Ask, "Did you complete your readings?" and, "Was there anything you did not understand?" Provide minor help if possible. If extensive help is required, make an appointment for a later time.

By the sixth week of semester, students did not need much direction about initial conversation, but they had become concerned about some matters associated with their learning. In particular, many were concerned about the assessment requirements of the unit,

so we arranged a task that required students to help each other reflect on their progress with the current assessment activity and devise an action plan that would enable them to meet the requirements. We provided the base groups with the following task:

Week 6

- < Greet each other
- < Check everyone has all the course information thus far. (Pass on messages, notes, handouts, etc.)
- < Allocate the following group roles:  
*Encourager* (Watches to make sure everyone is participating and invites everyone to join in)  
*Timekeeper* (Ensures that the group addresses all aspects of the task within the time limit)  
*Checker* (Checks to make sure all group members understand the tasks and the discussion)  
*Questioner* (Asks groups members to justify decisions)
- < Discuss the requirements for Portfolio 1 in the course outline.
- < Ask each member:  
 "What have you done so far?"  
 "What do you plan to do?"  
 "How do you plan to do this?"
- < With the support of your group, devise an action plan to meet the portfolio requirements. (Set goals, identify resources required, include a time line, indicate how you can help each other)

As can be seen from these examples, the base group activities served both a social function and an academic function. Some tasks helped students to get to know each other and to use appropriate social skills during interactions.

Other tasks required students to discuss issues related to their learning in the unit and encouraged them to share ideas and support one another in meeting the learning and assessment requirements of the unit.

When base groups met, we tried to provide an environment in which students could discuss issues in private. We felt that if we moved around the room and approached the groups, our presence would alter their conversations and could lead students to seek help from us rather than from their group members.

Therefore, we let groups meet without initiating interaction with them, but we encouraged students to invite us into their group if they wished to discuss something with us.

## OUTCOMES

The outcomes of establishing base groups were identified by obtaining feedback from students during the semester, and from journals that were kept by both of the tutors.

### *The Students' Reactions to Base Groups*

As part of the evaluation process, students provided written feedback about their experiences with the base groups in week four and week twelve of the semester. In week four we distributed a questionnaire containing eight questions, of which five related to specific aspects of base groups:

1. What do you think is the purpose of base groups?
2. What is your opinion of the use of base groups in these workshops?
3. How do you, feel about participating in base groups?
4. What are your initial impressions of your own base group?
5. Other comments.

We analysed the students' responses to this questionnaire promptly to determine whether

we needed to take any action, but the feedback was so positive that we did not make any changes. In week twelve we used a similar process to obtain feedback, but focused on exploring students' perceptions of how well base groups had achieved their purpose. We asked students the following questions:

1. Describe your experience as a member of your base group this semester.
2. What do you think the purpose of base groups has been in this unit? Has your base group achieved this purpose? How?
3. Why do you think your tutor implemented base groups in this unit?
4. What have you done in your base group this semester? What was useful, enjoyable or otherwise?
5. Would you like to participate in base groups again in another unit? Any suggestions as to how they could be improved?
6. Any other comments.

In presenting the results of these evaluations, I have combined the feedback from both questionnaires to present the students' overall reactions to base groups. Analysis shows that students perceived base groups as a positive support structure.

Most students thought that base groups were a good idea and an effective mechanism for providing support to them. They gave many reasons for this positive perception of base groups. For example, they indicated that discussions in base groups assisted their learning in many ways, such as helping them

gain new ideas and perspectives, feeling more confident about addressing the assignments and encouraging them to reflect on their beliefs and practice. Moreover, students seemed to like establishing better interpersonal relationships with peers. One student commented, "[It is] good to have the same group of people to discuss topics because we feel comfortable with each other."

In addition, students thought the groups contributed to a positive classroom climate. For example a student said, "It [base groups] works well. I was wary at first, but it now is good to see friendly NEW faces on Thursdays." However, some students were less positive about the worth of base groups in tutorials, and stated that they were "Okay". For example, one student explained, "I think they [base groups] have been effective, however, some people are more passive than others".

Generally, students perceived base groups as being supportive and they liked their group members. Some students thought base groups provided a supportive environment in which to discuss ideas, and other students found base groups were supportive if they missed a tutorial or lecture. For example, one student explained, "I feel we can rely on each other and talk openly about any issues which are of concern." Another student said, "I think base groups are an excellent idea- especially if you've missed out on something and need to be informed". Some students indicated they liked belonging to a group so they had

someone to contact when the need arose. For example one student said, "I am glad to have had the phone number group cards in my wallet the other day." However, a few students thought it was an individual's responsibility to attend lectures and tutorials and that "If you miss it, it's your problem."

Most students were very positive about participating in base group meetings, even those students who were not positive about the use of base groups in the tutorials. Students stated that they found what they did in base groups enjoyable and useful, particularly when they were discussing their practical experience in schools, assignments and ideas about education in general. Some students stated that they liked the way that tasks were structured and the guidance they provided. For example, one student commented, "It's good that we have set questions to ask; to have an introduction into other [personal] discussions." In addition, students liked getting to know other students, particularly those with whom they did not normally mix. Students found that the structure of base groups gave them a sense of belonging. For instance one student commented, "I like it [participating in base groups]. It makes me feel that I belong somewhere."

At the end of the semester, most students reported that they had enjoyed their experiences as base group members. Many described their groups as caring and supportive. Some students explained that they would implement base groups in their own

classes when they began teaching. One student commented, "Interesting experience to work with people I don't usually work with. I can see it will be useful for classroom application in the future." Only two students recorded that they did not particularly enjoy the experience.

Students understood the purpose of base groups, and most said that their groups achieved this purpose. They perceived that the purpose of base groups was to provide support to group members and to provide a safe forum in which to discuss ideas and share opinions. One student explained the purpose of base groups was "To share concerns and offer support to members, to discuss problems and be there for each other." A few students thought that their groups did not achieve this purpose, but explained that they normally sought support from friends who did not belong to their own base group.

Many students indicated that base groups assisted their learning. The discussions helped them gain a "better understanding of issues related to the unit" and become aware of different perspectives others held. One student commented that base groups helped students develop their "own thought processes" regarding teaching and learning. In addition, many students explained that by participating in base groups they learned how to implement them in the classroom.

Most of the 108 students who provided a written evaluation at the end of the semester said they would like to participate in base



croups again in another unit. Ninety five said they would like to participate in base groups again, eight students were ambivalent, and only five said they would prefer not to participate in base groups again. However, these five students explained that they thought base groups would be useful in other settings, such as in the first year of university or in schools.

In summary, establishing base groups seemed to enhance interpersonal relationships and provide a structure from which students gained academic and social support. Students gained a sense of belonging and relatedness and enjoyed establishing peer relations with new people. Students enjoyed participating in the base groups and most would be happy to participate in them again. Finally, students reported that base groups assisted their learning in terms of both understanding the subject material, and meeting the learning and assessment requirements of the unit

#### ***Tutors' Reactions to Base Groups***

The tutors involved in implementing base groups met on a weekly basis to reflect on the classes they had taken and to plan for the next classes. Much of the discussion focused on the base groups. We kept a journal of these discussions, which included our experiences, anecdotes and insights into the functioning of the base groups.

We found base groups were an effective way of providing academic and social support to students. In particular we found it useful to have the second year students discuss their

ongoing practicum experiences. In the "safe" environment of base groups, the students seemed to gain much support from their peers and learned that others shared many of their concerns about the practicum. In addition, they shared information about effective teaching strategies they had used and intended to implement when they were teaching their own classes.

The students seemed happy to seek help from base group members, especially with respect to routines instead of approaching us with queries, they discussed issues and matters of concern with the base group members. If students were unable to attend a lecture or tutorial, they contacted their base groups who obtained handouts or notes for them. Consequently, it was rare for students to approach us to request such information. Furthermore, students gave apologies for missing classes via their base groups at tutorials so that we received fewer routine telephone calls from students informing us that they would be absent. Overall the time we spent answering routine queries for students was reduced, as students seemed to prefer approaching members of their base groups rather than us.

We found base groups helped contribute to a cohesive classroom environment. Students seemed to enjoy coming to the class, and indicated that they gained a sense of belonging particularly if they did not already have friends in the tutorial group. It appeared to us that providing students with the

opportunity to talk to peers at the beginning of a tutorial helped them feel welcome and relaxed. Students also appeared to gain respect for each other and a climate of trust developed. This was evident as students took risks in contributing more openly to class discussions. We enjoyed teaching in such a classroom environment, as students seemed keen to attend tutorials, and more confident to work with others and to participate in learning activities, discussions and activities.

We felt that our personal commitment to the notion of base groups as a way of providing support for students was an important factor in making the base groups work. Without a high level of enthusiasm and commitment on the part of the tutors, it is unlikely that students would accept base groups as a valid inclusion in university classes. Some of our colleagues had reservations about base groups, and thought that they would not work with university students. They thought that they were more suited to children in schools, and that mature students would probably think base groups were childish. One colleague teaching the same second year unit was more positive about the notion and discussed the idea of base groups with her class. However the students decided they did not want to participate in them. It is possible that students who have not experienced base groups cannot make an informed choice about whether or not they would be useful. We however did not give our students a choice but confidently

established the groups and asserted that students would find them worthwhile.

## CONCLUSION

We set out to determine whether base groups could be used at the university level to provide academic and social support to teacher education students and in turn to enhance the quality, of learning. Furthermore, we thought that base groups could enable students to meet their social needs and pursue social goals while working on the subject matter in class. The students reported that the base groups were an effective mechanism for them to provide and receive academic and social support, and that participation in base group meetings helped their learning, and understanding. We as tutors also found that the base groups were an effective way of providing academic and social support to students and enhancing their learning. In addition, we found that base groups contributed to a more cohesive classroom environment.

It is important for tutors to attend to students' social motivation, since social motivation has been linked with academic achievement. In particular, tutors should consider how they can help students to meet their social needs at university and obtain academic support from their peers. An added benefit to teacher education students is that if tutors model the importance of attending to social motivation, it is more likely that the student teachers will attend to the social motivation of their own students when they take up teaching positions.

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